

Redwater Restorer

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness..." (Matthew 3:3)

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The Way Out Of Religious Division - Part II

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Redwater
Church of Christ

Services:

Sunday

Bible Class 10:00 a.m.
AM Worship 10:45 a.m.
PM Worship 6:00 p.m.

Wednesday

Bible Class 7:00 p.m.

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I began this series by defining the terms "denomination" and "denominationalism." "Denomination" - a group of congregations that are joined together under some governing body, that effectively serves to distinguish and divide them from other congregations. "Denominationalism" - advocacy of separation into religious denominations. I also suggested three reasons why "denominationalism" is wrong. 1) It is unscriptural (Col.1:17), 2) It is anti-scriptural (John 17:20-23; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:3-4) 3) It is harmful to the cause of Christ by discouraging people from believing in Christ (John 17:21).

But is it possible for people today to simply be Christians, without being a member of any man-made denomination? The answer is "Yes!" Indeed, by following the example of Jesus Himself, we can be members of His body, the Lord's church, just as we read about in the scriptures! To see how, let's start by noticing Jesus' own example in the religious climate of His day.

THE EXAMPLE JESUS HAS SET

When Jesus came to this earth, the Israelites were living under the Law of God as given by Moses. In that law, God had not made any provision for the division of His people into religious sects or parties. Yet, by the time of Jesus, the Jews had formed several distinct religious parties. There were Pharisees (somewhat conservative), Sadducees (very liberal, the "modernists" of their day), Essenes (radical isolationists), Herodians and Zealots. (political religionists). It was assumed that all who were serious about religion would be associated with one of these groups.

To which of these groups did Jesus belong? He belonged to NONE of these groups! Instead, He maintained a "non-sectarian" relationship with God to the very end. As an Israelite, living at a time when the Law of Moses was still in effect, He was simply an "Israelite." In addition, He encouraged all to live by the Law while it was still in effect (Matt. 5:17-20) In other words, He en-

couraged all to simply be what the Law of Moses intended them to be - "Israelites."

What would Jesus be today? If He were on earth, would He be a Baptist, or Catholic, or Presbyterian, or Methodist, etc.? If He was simply an "Israelite" then, would He not simply be a "Christian" today? That was certainly what His disciples came to be called (Acts 11:26).

The example Jesus has set for us is clear - just be what God originally intended under the Law which is in effect. Since in the New Testament, the "law of Christ" (1 Co 9:21) the disciples of Christ were called "Christians", so we should be! Not only should we be content with being called Christians, we should also be concerned with "just being Christians." NOTHING MORE, NOTHING LESS! But how can we be sure that we are simply Christians, members of the church we read about in the New Testament? It helps to see what the Bible tells us about the Lord's church in the first century.

THE CHURCH OF FIRST CENTURY

Jesus promised to build HIS church (Matt 16:18). The word "church" comes from the Greek word EKKLESIA, which means "a called-out group, an assembly, a congregation." Therefore, Jesus was promising to create His own group of people who have been "called." How does this "calling" take place? According to the apostle Paul, we are "called" by the gospel of Christ (2 Thess. 2:14). On the first Pentecost after the ascension of Christ, we see by preaching the gospel Peter "called out" those who were willing to express their faith in Jesus (Acts 2:38-41). Notice that those who gladly responded in faith, repentance and baptism were "added." To what and by whom were they "added"? We find the answer in verse 47: "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." The day of Pentecost was the beginning of the Lord's church. This "called-out" assembly or group was created when the gospel was proclaimed and people responded to it.

At first, the church existed only in

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Jerusalem. As the gospel spread, and people responded to it, groups of these saved people in various cities met together. Each group became known as a church in a "local" sense (in contrast to the church "universal" which is made up of all those saved throughout the world). For example, during Paul's first missionary journey, many such churches were established (Acts 14:21-23). By simply teaching the gospel of Christ, a local church was formed when those who obeyed the gospel joined together in their work and worship.

Though united in Christ, these local churches were independent of any human association or federation of churches. Christ directed them through His inspired apostles, as they taught them how to worship and work together (Acts 2:42). Sometimes this teaching by the apostles was done directly, other times by appointed emissaries (1 Cor. 4:17). Just as often, the teaching was done through the epistles or letters written by the apostles (1 Cor. 14:37; 1 Tim. 3:14-15; 2 Thess. 2:14-15; 3:14)

When we see what the Bible tells us about the Lord's church, we learn that by responding to the gospel and then paying close heed to the "apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42), people in the first century were able to be Christians only, without all the confusion prevalent today. But is it possible for us to do this today? YES IT IS! And here is how.

THE WAY OUT OF RELIGIOUS DIVISION

Remember, Christ calls us into His ekklesia (church) through the gospel. Therefore, we can begin by obeying the same instructions that Peter gave on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). By repenting of our sins, and being baptized for the remission of our sins, we would then receive the same blessings as did the 3000 on that day - SALVATION! By being saved in this manner, we KNOW that the Lord truly adds us to HIS church just as He added them (Acts 2:47)

What then? The early Christians continued steadfastly in the apostles'doctrine (Ac 2:42). They joined no other religious organization, and NEITHER SHOULD WE! By being in Christ, we are automatically united with all others who are in Him! As members of the Lord's church, we should study carefully the New Testament description of the church that continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine. This description is found in the Book of Acts and in the Epistles which follow it. It is here that we will find instruction from the Lord's apostles on how: 1) To worship the Lord acceptably, 2) To be scripturally or-

ganized as local congregations, 3) To live and work together as Christians, spreading the gospel of Christ through word and example. Since the apostles were guided by the Holy Spirit, we may be sure their instructions were exactly what Jesus wanted them to be! If we duplicate the early churches by following the apostles' instructions, we will simply be "Christians," and we can be certain the Lor is pleased with us. As Jesus said to His apostles about those who would receive or reject their instructions: "He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me" (Lk 10:16).

Simply being a Christian, and duplicating a New Testament congregation is not as difficult as one might think. There are literally thousands of such congregations throughout the world. THERE IS ONE IN YOUR AREA RIGHT NOW! And so, by following the example and teachings of Jesus, as revealed by His apostles, we can be led out of the religious confusion that dominates the religious world today!

If you are interested in any of the following please check the appropriate box and mail to the address below. Please include return address and phone number if possible.

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